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TAGS: PREL PGOV NATO MK

SUBJECT: MACEDONIA PASSES LANGUAGE LAW

REF: SKOPJE 464

Classified By: POLOFF BOSWORTH FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

SUMMARY

¶11. (SBU) Summary: In a surprise action on a long-standing ethnic Albanian objective, the Macedonian Parliament adopted a new language law on July 25. The law consolidates existing language use provisions from other laws and adds new provisions for use of minority languages in the Parliament and in correspondence with state institutions. Passed while the opposition remains absent in protest (reftel), the law reflects a deal between the ruling VMRO-DPMNE government and its new ethnic Albanian partner DUI. The law is an incremental but significant step forward for the use of the Albanian and other minority languages, and an instance of compromise and cooperation between the new coalition partners. End Summary.

Whoosh: Another Law Flies through Parliament

¶12. (SBU) Late on the afternoon of July 25, Macedonia's Parliament, in the absence of the opposition (reftel), adopted a new "Law on the Use of Languages Spoken by at Least Twenty Percent of Citizens of Macedonia" by a 75-0 vote. Only the VMRO-DPMNE coalition and new ethnic Albanian coalition partner DUI, long at loggerheads in the working group process to develop the new law, were present for the vote. With seemingly little progress made in multiple working group sessions prior to the dissolution of Parliament in April, passage of the law came as a surprise to observers and many MPs alike. Despite repeated promises from the President of Parliament to ensure a coordinated development of the Parliament's agenda, the law did not appear on the Parliament's announced agenda for that day. DUI's Xhevati Ademi told us that the law was a VMRO-DPMNE draft into which DUI inserted only a single clause, and that the two parties agreed to its adoption the night before the 25 July Parliament session. In a meeting shortly after the law passed, PM Gruevski told the Ambassador that the two parties had agreed the previous evening.

¶13. (C) Passage of the language law is an indicator of improved relations between new coalition partners VMRO-DPMNE and DUI, especially given DUI's earlier complaints and indications that it might leave the coalition even before the formal installation of the Government. Though only an incremental step in terms of usage of the Albanian language, passage of the law is an indication that despite VMRO-DPMNE's

elections' compelling parliamentary majority even without an ethnic Albanian partner, progress on inter-ethnic issues and the interests of partner DUI may get some of the new Government's attention. DUI's Musa Xhaferi told us that his party plans to be a quieter coalition partner through next spring's local elections, and then plans to turn up the volume on its demands to address key ethnic Albanian interests.

What,s in the Law? What Isn't?

¶4. (SBU) The new law, which re-packages language usage provisions from other laws in addition to legislating new uses, never uses the word "Albanian," always referring instead to "a language spoken by at least twenty percent of the population" (the same wording used in the FWA and Constitution). Substantively, the law's major concession is to the use of Albanian in the Parliament-- allowing committee chairs to lead sessions in Albanian, and calling for all documents and materials used by the Parliament to be translated into Albanian. The law also allows citizens of municipalities with ethnic Albanian or other minority populations exceeding 20% to correspond in writing with ministries (previously restricted to district offices of the ministries) in the minority language.

¶5. (SBU) In the language law working group, DUI had also sought the right for chairpersons of plenary sessions and Government ministers addressing plenary sessions of Parliament to use Albanian, but settled for VMRO-DPMNE's more limited concessions on Parliamentary uses. Additionally, DUI negotiators had sought expanded use of Albanian in the military and police, neither of which are included in the new law.

Reactions to the Law

¶6. (SBU) DUI's initial press statements were very positive, saying the law "opens the path for the Albanian language to become the second official language." In discussions with us, DUI leaders were more low-key. Teuta Arifi told us she views the new law as "generally acceptable" and said that the circumstances were such that her party "could only get so much." Musa Xhaferi called it a "quality law." He added that DUI will carefully monitor implementation in the coming months, but felt confident that VMRO "has overcome its fear" of expanding the official use of Albanian.

¶7. (SBU) While Albanian press reactions have been mixed, leaders of ethnic-Albanian opposition party DPA are taking their "sour-grapes" approach to new heights, calling the new law "treasonous". DPA's leader Menduh Thaci called it "DUI's greatest betrayal of Albanians," and "nothing but a compilation of articles from already existing laws," and asked the international community to intervene against the law.

Comment

¶8. (SBU) Given that a language law has been a long-standing goal of the ethnic Albanian parties and the subject of countless hours of negotiations over the years, basic information about the content of the law, as well as analysis and commentary in the public domain have been surprisingly lacking. It appears the political deal and the law moved too quickly for even party insiders to get a clear read, as some of the key VMRO-DPMNE and DUI leaders we have spoken to cannot explain which elements are new, which are re-packaged, and what the key changes are. Neither party is speaking very clearly on what they gave or what they got in this political deal. Some analysts are not surprised that political leaders of both parties are light on the substance of the law, saying it was a direct trade-off for DUI's agreement to pass the Parliamentary Rulebook. We expect the ethnic Albanian and other minority communities to observe the actual implementation of the law before reaching a firm judgment regarding how meaningful this step turns out to be in

practice.
Navratil